



## PORTRAYAL OF INDIAN LIFE IN KEKI N DARUWALLA'S BOAT-RIDE ALONG THE GANGA

Dr. Ramesh P. Chavan

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shri Shankar Arts and Commerce College, Navalgund- 582208, Dist- Dharwad, Karnataka- State, India.

### ABSTRACT

Daruwalla is known for his bitter, satiric tone and as one who writes from his experience of violence, he shows a preoccupation with some of the darker sides of existence particularly with death and destruction. Daruwalla is one who believes, like many other poets writing in recent years, that poetry should derive its inner strength from a social awareness and sense of commitments. While his early poems, show an acuteness of observation and sharpness of expression, the latter poems shows an intensification of social awareness, of a deep consciousness of the environment in which a poem is set.

### INTRODUCTION:

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla was born in Lahore in January, 1937. After taking his master's degree in English literature from Punjab University he joined the Indian Police Service. His first book of poems *Under Orion* was published 1970 and his *Apparition* in April published in 1971 won the Uttar Pradesh State Award in 1972. His third book *Crossing of Rivers* was published by the Oxford University Press in 1976. His poems figure in a number of Anthologies and he has himself edited an anthology of modern Indian Poetry under the title *Two Decades of Indian Poetry in English-1960-1980*. He won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1984. But the real significance and power of his poetry "emerge from the interaction between the subjective response and larger context that includes both myth and reality and actually" (Hari Mohan Prasad and C P Singh, 187).

His third book, *Crossing of Rivers* comprises poems in which the central metaphor is Ganges. The river comes alive in the poems not only as a physical reality symbolizing nature in tooth and claw but also as a mythical and spiritual presence with several primal, religious and emotive connotations. The present selection, '*Boat-ride along the Ganges*' is the first poem in this book.

The Indianness of Daruwalla's poetry derives not so much from his portrayal of Indian life as he has seen and experienced as a police officer on duty nor from a conscious efforts to make his writing Indian but from the rural Indian landscape which has inspired it. According to the poet's own admission his poems are rooted in the rural landscape and his poetry is earthy which meant that he has avoided that sophistication which 'white adding gloss, takes away from the power of verse'. Also, the strength of his poetry derives equally from his use of symbols, images and metaphors as also from a craftsmanship which is said to be creative and flexible and not mechanical. The poems in *Under Orion* shows, in the words of Nissim Ezskiel, "a fine blend of freedom and discipline, metrical rhythms and the word order of prose, compact, harsh alliterative phrasing and relaxed movement" (Madhusudan Prasad, 125). This description is true of almost all his other poems.

This is the first poem in the book *Crossing the Rivers*. The river both in this poem and in the other poems in the book becomes a metaphor for the Indian landscape on the one hand and a metaphor for human life itself, for "the river's rhythm is that of life and death, of birth and rebirth, of passion and rejection. It flows Swollen with hymns a fertility symbol in the desert of human lives, but its function is not to lighten the misery, but to show it" (Vrinda Nabar, 272). Note that Daruwalla has used the word Ganga instead of the anglicized 'Ganges' community used by all educated Indians.

*Boat-ride Along the Ganga* is one of Daruwalla's finest poems. Its scene is laid in Varanasi, the ancient and holy-city which has been the repository of Hindu culture and religion since immemorial. It contains a vivid and picturesque description of the Ganga with all its squalor, dirt and pollution. Ganga, the holy river of India, is the central metaphor in this poem. Commenting on this metaphor Vrinda Nabar writes that it appears 'with all its primal, religious and emotive connotations. The river's rhythm is that of life and death, of birth and rebirth of passion and rejection- in and around it are all signs of stagnancy, the tonsured heads, the fossilized anchorites, the tattooed harlots, and the dead who are brought to it shrouded in the anonymity face and simple syntax offering great delight to the reader and exposing the worn out Hindu customs, rituals and their bigoted custodian.

The opens with the poet's rowing across the Ganga in the evening. It represents and ugly sight of death, disease, sacred about them. Varanasi also presents an

ugly fight of a dying city. It does not have calm, soothing, cozy and sublime atmosphere; it vividly presents rivers cape and cityscape with all its ugliness:

"Filing into a motor-boat at dusk  
We scour the water upstream.  
Slowly the ghat-amphitheatre unfolds  
Like a diseased nocturnal flower in a dream  
That opens its petals only at dusk" (Ramamurti, 174)

The ghat or the bank is compared to an open theatre which gives a commanding view of the perpetual drama enacted in the river. Here the ideas are reversed, for the viewers are the boat and watch the drama on the ghats. "The ghat is not just riverside accoutrement but part of the poet's spiritual inscape" (Vrinda Nabar, 272). The image above used in the lines quoted above suggests the atmosphere of sickness, staleness, death and disease on the ghats of Varanasi due to the all enveloping pollution, both in air and on water. The apoplectic gloom' blurs the contours of the landscape.

"Palm-leaf parasols sprouting like freak-mushrooms  
Brood over platforms that are empty.  
Outlines blur in the apoplectic gloom  
As the panda points out Dasasvamedh" (Ramamurti, 174)

Umbrellas made of palm leaves .they are pictured as freak mushrooms springing up all over the place. The kind of gloom or emptiness which is caused by a sudden loss of sensation or consciousness. Pandas are a self-styled priest who acts as guides to the pilgrims at all holy places. Dasasvamedh, Every ghat on the banks of the Ganges has been named after a god or mythical figure. This particular ghat has been named after the 'ten-horse sacrifices'. The panda jointing out Dasasvamedh ghat begin to narrate the legend which the poets attentively listens to. But he suddenly sees 'the server mouth trained like a cannon on the river's flank'. Here the poet sarcastically points out how pollution and religiosity commingle the holy ghats of Varanasi. It suggests growing water pollution due to urbanization. Ganga, the holiest of river of the world, has become the unholy due to the excessive water pollution. The panda who is the spokesman of religion and legends conceals unholy thoughts of build and exploitation in the garb or religiousness. He stands for the pollution of human thought

"I listen avidly to his legend -talk  
Striving to forget what I chanced to see:  
The sewer-mouth trained like a cannon  
On the river's flank. It is as I feared;  
Hygiene is a part of my conscience and I curse it  
And curse my upbringing which makes me queasy  
Here" (Ramamurti, 175)

I listen avidly to his legend talk on the river's flank 'note the irony in the statement. The speaker's attention is actually focused on the mouth of the giant -sized sewer which spews all the city's sewage into the river. The panda's legend hardly interests him but it is a temporary escape from the disgusting sight of the pollu-

tion flowing into the sacred river whose waters are believed to dissolve all sins and pollution. His deep sense of hygiene is jolted by ugly sight. To panda monetary consideration is uppermost, even while he performs the last rites: Pyre is seen burning at each specific ghat. Here man bows down his head before 'the finality of fate' he ruminates on the evanescence of human life.

"And while the pandas calculate  
The amount of merit that accrues to you  
At each specific ghat you cross the pyres  
Bowing your head to the finality of fate.  
Behind the heat- haze rising from the fires,  
Objects shimmer, dances, levitate.  
You face reality on different plane  
Where death vibrates behind a veil of fire" (Ramamurti, 175)

It is ironic again that when the pandas keep talking about the merit or punya which one earns, the speaker ruminates over death which is everyone's final fate. The burning ghats keep reminding him of this final stage of the drama of one's life. Here as everyone else in the poem, the subjective responses of the speaker are more dominant than the actual sights described. Everything seems to lead ultimately to self-discovery and self-analysis. All the images employed seem to work out the spiritual disillusionment of the speaker. Here people reconcile with death and cultivate a stoic attitude towards it. They realize that death is the ultimate reality and weeping, mourning and beating of breast is useless. One dead is dead forever.

"There is no lament. No one journeys here  
To end up beating his breasts. This is much the  
Mourners learn  
From the river, as they from a ring of shadows  
Within whose ambit flesh and substance burns.  
We reverse the boat while a flight of mallard turns  
And drives west into the gloom." (Ramamurti, 175)

The mourners who come here to cremate the dead learn to accept the inevitability of fate and also to understand the meaninglessness of life. The flight of the wild ducks or cranes into the gloomy west carries with it symbolic over-tones which the speaker is quick to perceive. In this poem the river-scape, the ghatscape, and the pyre-scape all merge into one landscape, pointed with veracity in highly suggestive colour-words.

"We move past the phantom- panorama once more,  
Boat ferrying sand, sailboats on anchor,  
Poles scattered on her river to provide some room  
For bird to perch on when attacked by thirst;  
And once more the pyre; against a mahogany sky  
The flames look like a hedge of spear-blades  
Heated red for a ritual that bodes no good.  
The mourners are cave-painting, primitive, grotesque  
Done with charred wood." (Ramamurti, 175)

Daruwalla does not believe in what seem to him as empty rituals. Where it is suggested that the time is that of dusk with nightfall approaching. Funeral attendants' who form a caste by themselves. Death is great leveler. All are equal to Death but in life there is distinction between the rich and the poor, the high and the low. The Doms and Mallah are still treated as underdogs in Indian society and have to suffer a lot.

"When we disembark, the water front ahead  
Is smothered by night, red-peppered with fires  
As doms and mullahs cook their unleavened bread.  
Dante would have been confused here  
Where would the place this city  
In paradise or Purgatory or lower down  
Where fires smolder beyond the reach of pity?  
The concept of the goddess baffles you  
Ganga as mother, daughter, bride" (Ramamurti, 175)

Dante would have been confused here. The place has the characteristics of nei-

ther Purgatory, nor even the burning hell. Even Dante would have found it difficult to categorize a place like this. The speaker has little belief in the myths of Ganga being a goddess who has the power to wash away all sins and redeemed mankind. The ugly sights which he sees on the bank of the grand image built of the Ganga by age old myths and legends" (K Venkatachari 82). The presence of contraries bewilders the poet. He is in a fix since he does not know how to address Varanasi a-Paradise due to its religiosity and legendary characters of purgatory due to its all pervading pollution and other evils. The poet is disgusted at the stinking, non-seating and polluted atmosphere and he is confused whether he should address Ganga as 'Goddess', 'Mother' or 'daughter'

"What plane of destiny have I arrived at?  
Where corpse-fires and cooking –fires  
Burn side by side?" (Ramamurti, 175)

To conclude, the strange juxtaposition of the fires of cremation and cooking fires baffles the speaker. Here is a place where cooking fires cannot be lit if there are no corpse fires, for the people live on death, earning their livelihood by assisting those who have to cremate their dead. Both in this poem and in the sequence, Daruwalla has pictured Varanasi as a once spiritual city now reduced to a prototype of all corrupt cities. The underlying theme seems to be that of self-discovery which follow the pattern of the archetypal Hindu pilgrimage to the Ganges. Doubtless the journey ends in disillusionment, but leads to a discovery of one's country and one's own self as it happens in the case of Rama, the narrator protagonist of Raja Ro's *The Serpent and the Rope*.

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